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Education in northern Canada:
a defect of the vision

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EDUCATION IN NORTHERN CANADA: A DEFECT OF THE VISION

Once again, northern Canada is the subject of a good deal of enthusiasm and, in some quarters at least, optimism. Once again, certain sections of the business community are looking north, and in addition the government has lent its support to northern exploration and development.

Among other things, the government has taken on the task of educating the children of the Northwest Territories and Arctic Quebec. It is with this part of the federal activity in the north that I wish to take issue here: education in the Northwest Territories is badly planned, ineffective and in many ways actually harmful.

Most residents of southern Canada have a regrettable, if understandable, lack of knowledge about anything north of the sixtieth parallel. Many of them still cling to the myths of their childhood that the whole area is one vast snow-swept plain, that only Eskimos live there (in fact less than half the inhabitants are Eskimo) and so on. Those who look to the popular press for enlightenment must depend very often on press releases written or inspired by employees of the Department of Northern Affairs; it should surprise no one, then, that the generally rosy picture of progress and achievement in the north is not always as accurate or searching as one might wish. It should surprise no one, for example, that the mere physical accomplishments of building dozens of school buildings, or of doubling the number of children in school, (both facts are often used by the government as evidence of progress and cause for optimism) do not represent either a searching or a true picture of northern education. I hope here to fill in a few of the details of the picture.

It wouldn't be true to say that the government - or the Education Division of the Northern Administration Branch of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, to be specific - has not made plans. It has made plans in abundance. My contention is first that the plans have been badly made and, second, that they have been followed with true civil service passion for rules and policy even in the face of indications that they are wrong.

Let us begin at the top. What does the Department aim to do in its schools? What are the objectives of the system? Are they clear cut and precise, so that an adequate curriculum may derive from them? Are they realistic, growing out of an understanding of the communities the schools must serve? Let us consider some of the statements in this regard from high departmental officials. Back in 1956 at a summer course in Edmonton, students and prospective teachers for the North were told, on the one hand, that "the long term goal of education in Indian and Eskimo schools should be the integration or acculturation of Indian and Eskimo peoples into Canadian Society, while adding some elements of their culture to ours and accepting some of our cultural patterns, so that finally both cultures will be enriched". On the other hand, they were told (by a former chief superintendent of schools) that "the ultimate aim in the education of the native people is not to make them fall into the pattern of the white man's way of life, but to help them become better Indians and Eskimos". Perhaps a little confusing. Perhaps we are trying to produce two things at the same time. In fact, it was common then to think of the double-barrelled Eskimo or Indian, who could live in perfect ease in either culture. "The Subcommittee (on Eskimo Education) agreed (in 1952) that Eskimos should not be permitted to remain illiterate, even though their economy may be largely limited to hunting, fishing and trapping. The Subcommittee felt that the Eskimo people should be furnished with that degree and kind of education which will enable them to live a fuller life in their own environment and, at the same time, be able to take advantage of opportunities which may arise from the encroachment of outside civilization." I think there was a certain merit to such an aim, even though its implications may not have been

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fully considered. As former Northern Affairs Minister Lesage has written, "He (the Eskimo) is making a very good job of slowly assimilating a certain amount of civilization while retaining his independence, his pride, and his ability to carry on and care for himself." "A certain amount of education is an advantage to him, but he should not acquire this at the expense of his practical lessons in natural history and hunting."

I think one could not be blamed for inferring from these last remarks first, that the native people of northern Canada have certain cultural patterns which should be respected, certain attitudes of pride and independence that should not be destroyed, and second, that the main aim of education for them should be simple literacy, to which might conceivably be added some health education and perhaps some vocational experiences. While it would scarcely be the most ambitious of aims, it would at least be the most realistic for many parts of the Northwest Territories.

Was it ever in fact the aim, however? Whether or not it was, certainly it is no longer. Nor has it been since 1957, when my experience with norther education began. A statement of educational aims released by the Education Division within the past year includes a wide range of diverse objectives, including the "thorough" teaching of the total subjects, certain vocational skills, appreciation of the cultural heritage (both theirs and ours), awareness of the environment, knowledge of health and safety habits, instruction in citizenship, and even "to instil in the student respect for high standards of intellectual work" and "to teach ethical and moral principles" and "to encourage an appreciation of spiritual values". A tall order, indeed. One might tend to disregard this not-too-well composed set of aims and objectives, were it not for the prefacing remarks which read, "The following statement of aims has been adopted by this Department after having been approved by the Minister of Northern Affairs." So there. And simple literacy and the double-barrelled native have gone out the window, or so it seems.

But wait. As recently as June of 1962 the new Chief of the Education Division wrote for publication that "pupils while passing through a period of primary education must become efficient in this (English) language which they need, without losing their own cultural and linguistic tradition."

Well, to add to the confusion, let us look finally at an article entitled "The Opening Door" which appeared in two recent issues of the Department's own periodical, "North". It is written by R.A.J.Phillips, assistant to the Director of the Branch responsible for education, and chief spokesmen for the Department on northern matters. To all intents and purposes the article is a statement of educational aims and policy, although the author stoutly denies this in the opening paragraph. A few gems will be sufficient. In one place we are told simply that "In short, we teach our pupils to think: this above all." We are later assured that "The purpose emphatically is not solely to prepare children for wage employment. It is not to promote the integration of Eskimos and Indians, if by integration is meant the assimilated submersion of individuals in a general Canadian flood." Perhaps the aim is citizenship, for as Mr. Phillips says, "Will the hunter and trapper be any better for having gone to school? Emphatically, yes, for it is accepted in our society that education, including formal education, is important and even vital to good citizenship." How much education? Well--- "The first object of the teacher ... must always be to encourage the pupil to go through his twelve or thirteen grades of academic study...." "Except as a temporary expedient, we are thinking of vocational education as a project which starts only after the pupil has completed the major part of a high school education." This isn't even realistic in southern Canada. It is utter nonsense in most of northern Canada.

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It should be clear by now that one will look in vain through official departmental utterances for any clear statement of educational aims and policies. All is confusion.

However, this does not mean one cannot determine what those aims are, for the actions pursued spell out clearly the implied aims, even if they have not been clearly stated. These actions include the building of a large number of small community schools as well as several huge residential schools. The curriculum for all these schools in the Mackenzie District is the Alberta curriculum! Instead of one designed to suit the educational situation, the Alberta curriculum has been used with very few modifications. In the small schools where teachers are very familiar with local conditions and realize the ridiculous nature of the task set for them, many local modifications are made out of necessity. But they are made in spite of, not because of, the Department's curricular arrangements. In the large schools, which tend to be totally divorced from the native background, the modifications are less frequent and less adequate. Of course, there are indications from Ottawa that a new "northern" curriculum is in preparation, and surely, with the number of persons engaged in curriculum planning that there are, something should come out of it. However, promises of this sort were made in 1956, and have been made every year since, but still the Alberta curriculum is in use. There are some ludicrous results. Children in grade three do a unit of work on people in distant places - the Eskimo. Grade nine students, children of seal hunters and reindeer herders who have scarcely seen a garden, struggle to learn the soil zones of agricultural Alberta, or to learn about breeds of dairy cattle. A girl will learn sewing on a Singer electric, and cooking on an electric range. Unrealistic? Of course. And yet, to me, this is proof positive of the Department's real aim. The method is to impose upon the Eskimos and Indians of the Mackenzie District a most inappropriate curriculum designed for a southern population which is largely white, English-speaking, middle-class Canadians without any true regard for the needs of the students themselves. The aim must surely be, then, to turn them at all costs into white, English-speaking, middle-class Canadians, or the closest thing to it their color will allow.

One might well ask, "what do the parents of these children want in the way of education?" Department officials are prone to point to the willingness of some parents to send their children to a residential school as evidence of their endorsement of the school program. It could, however, simply be an indication of their faith in education and not in any way an endorsement of the curriculum. The lack of enthusiasm for education exhibited by many parents whose children live at home while attending school - parents who perhaps have a much closer acquaintance with the school's program - may suggest that they are not in favor of what their children are being exposed to. However, here again the Department has displayed a lack of concern for the people most vitally involved in the educational process, and I suspect also a lack of respect for the intelligence of the people. The official attitude would seem to be, "They are ignorant people who don't know the value of education. Why ask them?" Perhaps it isn't necessary to ask them, however. In an article in the November, 1959, issue of the Northern Affairs Bulletin, Branch Director B. G. Sivertz stated, "We in this Department know the Eskimo people very well. We are getting to know the northern Indians, too. We are well aware of the capacities of these people and of their aspirations." Perhaps this is true for Mr. Sivertz, and he therefore does not need to ask the people what they want. But I doubt if it is true for a good many other senior officials whose acquaintance with the north consists of a few official tours of inspection. Certainly it is true that many senior educational officials come to their jobs from "outside", without training or experience particularly appropriate to native education, and subsequently have only the most fleeting and casual of experiences with native people. They cannot possibly understand them under such circumstances, unless they are all gifted with unusual

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powers of perception. Their actions would suggest that they are not. I am reminded of the superintendent of schools who remarked to one of his principals that there wasn't an Indian or Eskimo home in the particular district he was visiting that was a fit home for a child. What transparent nonsense! As if love and affection can only be found where there's running water. No doubt he made his judgment on the basis of the degree of physical comfort and convenience in the homes - I doubt if he knew a single native family well enough to judge it any other way - but surely one can expect better than that from senior responsible officials. I think Mr. Sivertz is more optimistic than he has reason to be when he says his Department knows the natives well. It does not, nor does it care to.

Even if the feelings of a group of parents were shoved under their very noses, there is no need to think the Departmental officials would take heed. I am reminded of an incident that occurred in Fort Simpson in 1958. I was principal of the little school there at the time. The Department has a policy of supplying Catholic teachers in predominantly Catholic towns. This is extended, in the residential schools, to a dual system involving Catholic and non-Catholic sections in the school. At that time, this religious division was even in effect in our little four-room school in Fort Simpson. That is, we had two rooms teaching grades one to nine for Catholics, and right next to them two rooms teaching grades one to nine to non-Catholics. The inefficiency of such a system in such a small school is obvious. The bitterness and misunderstanding that can develop may be less obvious but very powerful. The small but active Home and School Association decided to take some action. A petition was drawn up, and all the residents in town were asked to consider it. It asked simply that the school be reorganized on grade rather than religious lines. Roughly 90% of the people- Indians and white, catholic and non-catholic - signed it. And yet, when it was presented to the Department, and followed by considerable correspondence, the net result was a flat "no". The Department policy did not permit such a change. Is it unfair, then, to suggest that the Department does not want to know what the people think?

It would seem to me, then, that the Department of Northern Affairs has set out to turn the Indians and Eskimos of the Mackenzie District into typical southern citizens; that it has not considered the needs or wishes of the people most concerned, and that it does not want to consider them. And what do the people think of all this? I really couldn't say. They are, after all, individuals, with individual thoughts. I do know, though, what one person thinks her education is all about, and I have strong suspicions that she speaks for many. She is a Toucheux Indian girl - a former grade seven student of mine - who wrote: "The R.C.M.P. sent the children from each tribe to school so they could understand how to read, write and speak English. Then the schools were gradually built up until there were big hostels for children to have school and learn about white people better." That is the way it appears to at least one young lady after seven years in the system.

"But so what?" you may say. "Isn't it good enough that the government is providing <u>some</u> kind of education?" I submit that it is not. Nor is it good enough that southern Canadians pay so little attention to the quality of education. After all, it cost them over eight and one-half million dollars during the year ending March 30, 1960 to operate the schools in the Territories, almost all of it from southern tax dollars. About 10% of the cost was borne by the government of the Territories (but even a large part of its revenue comes from federal sources) but all the rest came directly from federal funds, and ultimately from us. Of this amount, well over $5,000,000 was spent on operation alone. In short, then, we are spending over $5,000,000 per year to educate perhaps 5000 pupils - or about $1,000 per pupil - in addition to annual capital expenditures which are substantial. "In the year since 1953-54", says Deputy Minister R. G. Robertson, in North magazine, "we have spent

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nearly twenty million dollars on the construction of schools, hostels, and other educational facilities". Not to mention, of course, the services provided (and paid for) by other Departments - teacherages by Department of Public Works, health services by Northern Health Services, and so on. This cost per pupil is high when compared with Alberta's, which for the same period was about $325.00 per pupil, and especially high when one considers that this $325 represents operational and capital expenditure, not merely operational costs.

There are reasons, of course, why northern costs must be higher. We are all aware of them. I am not suggesting that costs should be cut. What I am saying is that the amount however you look at it, is great enough that we can expect it to be administered wisely, and can expect to be kept well informed about its disposition.

Basically, what I am saying is that it is not being spent wisely. First of all, it is failing to provide a realistic education for many of the students. Its heavy emphasis on an academic program can scarcely be expected to produce good academic results. Many Indian and Eskimo children - I would say perhaps the majority in the Mackenzie District, are not able to cope effectively with such a program. I do not mean that they have not the intelligence: I am certain that they have. But they do not have the cultural or linguistic background (or the motivation in many cases), it will take time for these to develop. I think it was D. H. Lawrence who remarked "Drag a lad who has no capacity for true learning or understanding through the processes of education and what do you produce in him? A Profound contempt for education and educated people." His remarks may be inappropriate if we equate "capacity for true learning" with intelligence, but not so inappropriate if we equate it with ability to handle the usual academic program. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine how a frustrating, meaningless curriculum through which a child can work his way with at best only slight success can be expected to produce competent and enthusiastic academic graduates, or even a respect for those who do succeed.

If the academic portion of the curriculum gives one cause to wonder, then perhaps the vocational portion will give some consolation. Certainly training programs being conducted to train youths and adults for specific jobs now available are commendable. However, when one considers the inroads being made into our economy by automotion, one must wonder about the value of vocational education in the future. Perhaps, as G. H. Bantock has remarked (Times Educational Supplement", "Any great emphasis on vocationalism .... is, for the average child . . . illegitimate, in that the sorts of jobs these children are likely to be given will demand only the minimum training which can best be given on the spot." Perhaps even the vocational aspects of the present program need some thorough re-thinking.

Of course, it is future vocational needs which are used as the excuse, very often, for the present program. Two assumptions seem to be made: that Indians and Eskimos will only be able to take an active part in northern economic development if they have undergone a typical southern academic education plus some vocational training; and that widespread industrial development of northern Canada, producing industrial towns of some size and so on, is imminent. I think the first of these assumptions is obviously shaky for there are many instances of people from cultures other than our own who have been successful in an industrial economy. The second is a little more difficult to assess. However, I think it fair to say that in general the most enthusiasm and optimism about northern development can be found in government circles. Even here, there are serious doubts at the highest levels. Deputy Minister R. G. Robertson has recently written on the subject "I think it is safe to say that no substantial economic development is likely to be based on renewable resources .... resources of the soil in the form of agriculture or timber or the resources of the water in the form of commercial fisheries". "Trapping and trading of furs will .... continue, as in the past, to have its place and to provide the livelihood of many

people. I think it is safe to say, however, that none of these things - nothing based on the renewable resources of the north with the sole exception of hydro-electric power - can ever be sufficient in scale to form an important and substantial economic base or to provide an important addition to the national income of Canada." What prospects are there, then? As Mr. Robertson says, "The interesting prospects depend on the non-renewable resources: on mining and on oil and gas."

When he considers the possibilities for these, the Deputy Minister remarks that "resources are likely to be marginal or sub-marginal unless they occur in large deposits or under particularly favorable conditions. Their general position .... can be improved only if prices are likely to go up or, alternatively, if we can bring costs significantly down." But, he comments, "We see little reason to think that prices of minerals are likely to increase in the next couple of decades. While demand will clearly be great, there will be ample competition from non-Canadian sources of supply..... The economic position generally can be improved only by getting costs down."

Mr. Robertson points out that the biggest cost factor is transportation, and that there is a good possibility of reducing this in regard to oil from the Arctic for sale abroad. However, he does not extend this optimism to other mineral resources. I think his concluding remarks in this particular article are worth considering: "The north is much too tough a country to burgeon and bloom in a couple of decades as the Prairies did. Unless this is understood, the present enthusiasm behind the northern vision could readily become a premature disillusionment." And yet it is upon such a notion of blooming in twenty years that much of the present educational policy is based.

Our educational dollars are being spent unwisely, then, to the extent that they are failing to provide a realistic education for many if not most of the students. What about the cultural choice we so often hear spoken of? Does the educational system succeed at all in preparing the student for life in either culture, so that he can make a choice if he must? I have suggested it does not prepare him for life in our culture. In addition, it denies him training for life in his own. It keeps him occupied in school (very often in a residence a long distance from his home) during the very years when he should be beginning the traditional occupations, if we really want him to be able to make a cultural choice. Former Northern Affairs Minister Lesage has written that "the normal Eskimo boy of fourteen has a knowledge of animal lore that is nearly equal to his father's." But how can he if, from ages six to sixteen, he spends five hours a day in school, or perhaps ten months a year away from home in a residential school? And how can a boy from let us say, Spence Bay or Simpson Strait learn the sea-hunting ways of his own culture while he is attending school hundreds of miles away at Inuvik, south of the tree-line and a hundred miles from the sea? Obviously he cannot.

Well, besides failing to provide northern youth with a program of instruction suited to their needs and capabilities, besides failing to prepare northern youth to make the cultural choice we are told they must make, what else does northern education do? What does it do to his independence and to his pride? What does it tell him about his cultural background and about the intellectual worth of his own people? Of course, lip service is paid to his people's culture; occasionally he might be reminded of the contribution of the Indian to Canadian life. But the daily school fare says to the student, "Here is our way, the good way." Would it be surprising if he were to conclude that his own culture is immensely inferior, something of which he can only be ashamed? In southern Canada, we are all familiar with the allegation that Indians "seem to have no pride in themselves. If this is true, could it be at least in part because of the education they have received? Certainly, the allegation could not be made reasonably against the Indians of, let us say, somewhat remote Old Crow, but I wonder how long it will be until it can be made. I wonder how long it will take the present educational diet to have its effect. Mr. Lesage has said, "In the North, they are proud, independent and competent in their own life .... . Their culture is <u>interest</u> to us as a thing apart but to them it is vital: without it they could not find the

spirit to survive." But our educational policy fails to recognize this view at all.

The cultural disintegration is in many cases hastened by removing the child from the home. To quote Mr. Lesage again, "The family is the unit of Eskimo life - and strong are the forces of family - and group loyalty and responsibility - and the desire to be an honored member of the community." If this is so, then what must be the effect of taking Eskimo and Indian children from their homes and housing them in dormitories where forty children share one huge room? Where two hundred dress in the same style and color? Where four hundred sit down to eat at one time? I am not saying that there are not some benefits to be derived from residence life. I am saying that the northern educational system, and particularly the residential aspects of it, are destroying the children's link with their own culture. What effects can we expect from this cultural deprivation? What can we expect the absence of family to do to a child's emotional growth? And for that matter, what effect will it have on intellectual growth?

It occurs to me at this point that I have referred to the Minister of Northern Affairs in the former, Liberal government, and that in general the references have been favorable. Lest you conclude from this that I believe the Liberal government had the right answers, and that these have been abandoned by the Conservative government, let me point out two things. First, it was the Liberal government which first laid plans for the huge residential schools and which first applied the Alberta curriculum to the northern schools. The Conservative government inherited these. Mr. Lesage's government, in other words, didn't always act in a manner which his words might lead one to expect. Second, it was under the Liberal government that the present religious policies were laid down. I find it hard to believe that these policies were either necessary or desirable, but certainly the political implications of attempting to change them make it unlikely that they will be abandoned.

Of course, it is scarcely satisfactory to find fault without being prepared to offer some positive suggestions. Let me offer a few now.

First of all, steps should be taken immediately to clarify the aims for northern schools. I do not for a moment think that this could or should be done by present Departmental personnel. Perhaps some of them could help, but many of them are too concerned with justifying past policies to be objective in considering new ones. Instead, a commission might well be appointed, which would include in its membership anthropologists, sociologists, educators, economic experts, and certainly Eskimo and Indian leaders. And whatever the Commission should recommend, the federal government should be prepared to act on it, even if it should mean abandoning some multi-million dollar projects which are now in operation but which are felt to be wrong.

I would not be at all surprised if the commission were to recognize three pressing needs; the need to return the school to the community; the need for the curriculum to vary - and vary widely - in different parts of the Territories; and the need to recruit, train, and retain a corps of devoted and able teachers.

With regard to the first of these, it is only through a return to the community that any progress can be made in providing a meaningful curriculum. There may be room for one good residential school in the Territories to accommodate academically able students who are of high school age. There may also be room for small residences attached to community schools to accommodate a few youngsters from the immediate vicinity. But there is no room for huge residential schools such as exist now, to accommodate children from the age of six from hundreds of miles away.

With regard to curriculum, it must be recognized that the needs of one community are not the same as those of another. If it is agreed that a curriculum, to be effective, must attempt

to meet the needs of the community, then it must be agreed that one standard curriculum will not suit all northern schools. What is needed in the predominantly white community of Yellowknife or Hay River is not what is needed in the totally Indian community of Old Crow, or the predominantly Eskimo community of Cambridge Bay. This is obvious it hardly seems necessary to state it. And yet until now the same curriculum has been prescribed for them all.

Finally, with regard to teaching staff, there is a need for stability which does not exist at present. There have been many talented and sincere teachers in the service, and many of them have stayed, at least for a few years. However, it is not uncommon to find teachers hired for service in the north who have had no previous experience in native schools, or even in primary grades, although it has been pointed out that 58.5% of all the students are in grades 1, 2 and 3. No real effort is made to provide special training for them before they begin work in their community, either. New teachers will be given a one or two-week indoctrination course at Fort Smith or Yellowknife, but it will be more concerned with Departmental detail and regulations than with real understanding of the people or the job. What they need is a full semester or more devoted to genuine study of their new career and its problems. By employing good teachers, providing them with special training, and then putting them to work in a challenging and well-planned educational program, it should be possible to build up a permanent group of excellent teachers equal to the difficult task.

In conclusion, it must be said that the Department has already proposed some of these changes. Particularly, it has spoken of providing more community schools and small residences. As Phyllis Burns wrote in the January, 1960 issue of the NCIC Bulletin, "What is needed now is not a backward look to the educational program as it was, but a forward look to the implementation of policies already approved by the Department responsible: more day schools in communities large enough to make these possible; Eskimo teachers, especially for the early grades, and some smaller residential units that will avoid emotional hazards associated with institutional living in large groups; Eskimo and Indian house parents for hostels serving children whose families are out on the trap lines during the academic year; advanced education for all in accordance with their capacities including vocational preparation for careers of choice." The unfortunate thing is that what Miss Burns wrote two years ago could just as well be written now, and I am afraid will still be appropriate two years from now.

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